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Finding the Frontier

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Finding the Frontier

Garrett Carr

When you are creating a nation the cartographical sign of the borderline is extremely useful. Borders are synonymous with nationhood, rarely is one found without the other. They can be loud-proud statements for the wider world but also, pointedly, for people across the street – the people who perhaps don't feel quite so at home. The symbolic value of Ireland's border has been acted upon and reproduced away from it, mostly in Northern Ireland's urban spaces. By using flags and murals, people of opposing political identities mark off their neighbourhoods. Broadly, these groupings are Unionist, who are determined to maintain the link with the rest of the United Kingdom, and maintain the border or they are Republican, who wish to erase the border and reunite Ireland. During the 20th Century this clash boiled over into the Troubles, a 30-year phase of violence that killed over three thousand people.

Ireland's border, any state border, is in part powerful because it is a symbol. Benedict Anderson calls the sharp-edged graphic representation of nationhood 'map-as-logo.' In *Imagined Communities* he wrote, "Instantly recognizable, everywhere visible, the logo-map penetrated deep into the popular imagination." I wanted to rethink the borderline sign on Ireland's map and create a border map that questioned nationalism instead of acting it out. My project not an attempt to question Ireland's partition, my maps are still border maps, merely of a different sort, but to create a map that would break down the traditional, divisive, border sign. In order to remap Ireland's border I walked it from end-to-end, a journey that took about six weeks. I have written about it in a book called *The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland's Border*. The area is mainly

rural; open country. Some sections possess a desolate beauty, the boglands north of Lough Derg and around Cuilcagh Mountain for example. Although it travels through countryside and farmland the borderline is rarely invisible, it follows hedgerows, stone walls and – most often – rivers and streams. But from the very beginning of my walk I found that these boundaries were often perforated or bridged, far more often than was charted on official maps. Gates were cut in border hedgerows for the convenience of farmers, stepping-stones and community-built bridges span rivers, walker's routes go wherever they please. These kinds of connections have always been there, although I suspect their numbers have increased in the twenty years since the end of the Troubles. I even found some substantial bridges that were not yet charted on other maps, proving their recent origin. On the ground cross-border cooperation was quietly happening and this seemed to be the perfect topic for my map. So, started to record unofficial border-crossings during my surveys. To qualify for a place on the map a crossing point had to be deliberate, built into existence. It had to show signs of being in use. It had to be left off the Ordnance Survey 1/50,000 scale map, the closest scale commonly available. This was because 'The Map of Connections' was to chart the overlooked and the unsanctioned.

When I found a connection meeting the criteria my process was always the same. I switched on the GPS device. While it was triangulating with satellites above I photographed the connection and wrote a description of the site. Back in the studio the connections are rendered by computer. As I made more surveys a string of dots began to stretch across the outline of Ireland on my computer screen.

In 'The Map of Connections' the border has been turned into a series of perpendicular dashes. They convert the non-space of the borderline into a place where things can actually happen. The dashes are porous and open, the colour flows in-between to fill the space it is given, reflecting the actual condition of the border on the ground. The connection lines might serve as stitches, binding rather than dividing.

So far I have recorded seventy-seven connections and when plotted they seemed to open up a new graphic description of state border. The dashed borderline is thrown on its side but still most definitely there. It was not until I began laying out the map that I realised what a paradoxical bind this was. The map uses the border's contradictions, unofficial crossings, to represent the border, to call it up in the mind of the viewer. It is both a division map that is about connection and a connection map that is about division. Ultimately the root of the paradox might be this: I tried to dismantle a borderline by travelling it, sticking close to the line, simultaneously respecting and disrespecting it. Yet this contortion could help promote new thinking. Connection and division sit at exactly the same coordinates. I like to think that on 'The Map of Connections' the border has been rewritten to define the space in terms of people in movement rather than simplistic binary symbols.

Garrett Carr was born and grew up on the west coast of Ireland and now lives in Belfast, where he teaches at Queen's University. He has recently published *The Rule of the Land:*

Walking Ireland's Border (Faber & Faber): a book that is both a history and a portrait of Ireland's borderland. It is illustrated by his own cartography. For more examples of Garrett's work, and more images of 'The Map of Connections', please visit:

www.garrettcarr.net.